

# Slavic Jesters and the Byzantine Hippodrome

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Although the generic meaning of the Old Slavic word *skomrah* as “buffoon, clown” has not been called into question, there is nevertheless constant dispute among Slavic scholars regarding the term. The *skomrah* controversy is quite unlike that concerning Byzantine spectacles, for while the latter are, for no obvious reasons, usually derived from late Roman ones,<sup>1</sup> with *skomrah* the opposite is true: the well-documented situation of the fifteenth through seventeenth century is applied to less well-known ancient times.<sup>2</sup>

Not only is the etymology of the word *skomrah* unclear (over a dozen explanations have been proposed),<sup>3</sup> but even the origin of the institution itself is unknown. Some think of it as a foreign institution brought from Byzantium or the West;<sup>4</sup> others believe that it was local, having developed from ancient pagan rituals.<sup>5</sup> With the growth of interest in pagan culture and the decline of migration theory, the latter view is beginning to prevail.

However, if we look at the contexts in which the word *skomrah* (or, in its East Slavonic form, *skomoroh*)<sup>6</sup> is found in Old Bulgarian and Old Russian

texts, it becomes apparent that for centuries the term was used *only* in translations from Greek. The first Slavic author who used it was George of Zarub Cave (twelfth or thirteenth century).<sup>7</sup> Original Slavic works of the previous era use many words with similar meanings (*igrec*, *glumenc*, *sopelnik*, etc.), but never *skomrah*.

I am confident that if this were a deeply rooted pagan institution, it would have an equally old Slavic designation. It is inconceivable that it might have been replaced by a neologism just as the institution itself stopped being relevant. Yet each time a Slavic *litteratus* wants to refer to buffoons he chooses from a variety of words, but never *skomrah*. On the other hand, when such a *litteratus* sets out to translate Greek, the word is ready at hand. Even if we assume a Christian taboo on the pagan term, this would still not account for such selectivity. I suggest that this can be explained in only one way, namely that the word itself was borrowed in conjunction with a foreign institution. That is why for a long period it was regarded by the Old Slavs as applicable only to Byzantine life and, conse-

<sup>1</sup>C. Mango, “Daily Life in Byzantium,” *JÖB* 31. 1 (1981), 353.

<sup>2</sup>A. Morozov, “K voprosu ob istoričeskoj roli i značenii skomorohov,” *Russkij folklor* 15 (1976), 21.

<sup>3</sup>Cf. M. Fasmer, *Etimologičeskij slovar russkogo jazyka*, III (Moscow, 1987), 648–49, for main etymologies. Also, A. Slupski, “Slavisches ‘Zauberer, Hexe’ und Verwandtes,” *ZSlPh* 35.2 (1971), 315; E. Popoff-Böcker, “Skomorohi na Rusi,” *Slavica Gandensia* 15 (1988), 56–57.

<sup>4</sup>Ja. Grot, “O slove špilman v starinnyh russkij pamjatnikah,” *Russkij filologičeskij vestnik* 1 (1879), 35; A. Veselovskij, “Razyskanija v oblasti russkogo duhovnogo stiha,” *Sbornik otdelenija russkogo jazyka i slovesnosti AN* 32, 4 (1883), 178–83; A. Famincin, *Skomorohi na Rusi* (St. Petersburg, 1889), 1, 13; A. Kirpichnikov, *K voprosu o drevnerusskij skomorohah* (St. Petersburg, 1891), 3, 11, 13–15; V. Miller, *Očerki russkoj narodnoj slovesnosti I* (Moscow, 1897), 54; S. Karakostov, *Bălgarskijat teatăr* (Sofia, 1972), 42, etc.

<sup>5</sup>I. Beljaev, “O skomorohah,” *Vremennik . . . obščestva istorii . . .* 20 (1854), 69; A. L’vov, *Leksika Povesti Vremennyh let* (Moscow, 1975), 60; A. Belkin, *Russkie skomorohi* (Moscow, 1975), 15, 30–31, 43, 50, 98–99; R. Zguta, *Russian Minstrels. A History of the Skomorokhi* (Oxford, 1978), 1–21; I. Nemec, “Obřadní maska v slovanské demonologii,” *Slavia* 57 (1988), 248–49, etc.

<sup>6</sup>On the original form cf. H. Lunt in *SIEEF* 10 (1966), 89–90.

<sup>7</sup>I. Byčkov, “Novyj spisok poučeniya Zarubskogo černorizca Georgija,” *Bibliografičeskaja letopis’* 3 (1917), 104. It may be assumed that, although George’s text as a whole is genuine, the passage about *skomrahs* is an allusion to some Greek prototype, for example, *Constitutiones s. Apostolorum*, II, 56.

The first mention of *skomrah* in the Primary Russian Chronicle (1068) is in fact a quotation from “Poučenie o kaznjah Božijih”; see E. Granstrem, “Ioann Zlatoust v drevnej russkoj i južnoslavjanskij pis’mennosti,” *DrLit* 35 (1980), 350. It is a translation from Greek and therefore cannot be regarded as original Slavic evidence (this fact remained unknown to Zguta). Unfortunately, the prototype has not yet been identified (F. Thomson, “Quotations of Patristic and Byzantine Works by Early Russian Authors as an Indication of the Cultural Level of Kievan Russia,” *Slavica Gandensia* 10 [1983], 69–70, 82), and it is unknown which Greek word was translated by the Slavic *skomrah*.

As far as “Letopisec Perejaslavlja-Suzdal’skogo” is concerned, to which Zguta refers (*Russian Minstrels*, 8), it is a 15th-century source and in mentioning *skomrahs* the anonymous author alludes to Polish influence in Kiev (M. Berežkov, “Ešče neskol’ko slov o letopisce Perejaslavlja Suzdal’skogo,” *Sbornik istoriko-filologičeskogo obščestva . . . v Nežine* 3 (1900), 69.

quently, occurred to Slavic *litterati* only when they were dealing with a Greek text.

If this conclusion is correct, then several inferences can be made that are of some importance to both Slavic and Byzantine scholars. First of all, numerous Slavic etymologies of the word *skomrah* should be rejected outright, for the origin of the Slavic term was a Greek word. (It is not our present goal to speculate which one).<sup>8</sup> All this does not mean, of course, that the jesters the Slavs had were foreigners, but that for their own personnel they had their own words.

Whatever the original term, it must have been in use at the turn of the tenth century when the transplantation took place, for *skomrah* occurs simultaneously in several Old Bulgarian sources: the *Zlatostruj*, the *Sinai Paterikon*, Malalas' Chronicle, the Vita of John Chrysostom. A question arises: What was the Byzantine word rendered in translation as *skomrah*?

This is not an easy question to answer. In several contexts *skomrah* is used for the Greek word *μῦθος*,<sup>9</sup> and this is natural for their functions are similar. There is one instance when it is used to translate Chrysostom's *ἵπποδρομῖαι*,<sup>10</sup> which can be explained by the fact that in the Byzantine world the Hippodrome played the same role that the *skomrahs* did in the life of the Old Slavs. Yet *skomrah* was also used to translate *ἡνίοχοι*,<sup>11</sup> which is harder to understand: although horse races were regarded as a great entertainment in Constantinople, charioteers did not look like jesters. Finally, *skomrah* oc-

curs in an especially mysterious context in the Vita of John Chrysostom, which will be analyzed more thoroughly.

The author of this lengthy vita, which Photios attributed to Patriarch George of Alexandria (620–630), has yet to be conclusively determined. Some agree with this attribution,<sup>12</sup> but most scholars reject it. In fact, the author must have been a Southern Italian monk.<sup>13</sup> As to the dating of the vita, there can be no doubt: as early as 726 it was quoted by John Damascene, so it must have been written in the late seventh or early eighth century.<sup>14</sup>

In the Old Bulgarian period, under Symeon, the vita was translated into Slavic.<sup>15</sup> The translation is of very high quality and displays excellent knowledge of Byzantine *realia*; for example, depending on the context, it renders the Greek *βάρβαρος* in six different ways.

The vita describes an episode in Athens in which the saint is invited to take part in a dispute with pagans in the presence of the city fathers. When the philosopher Anthemios furiously condemns them for sympathizing with a Christian, the eparch interrupts him: "It is improper . . . to talk in a way unacceptable in such a gathering; to do things resembling [the conduct of] demotes (τὰ δημοτῶν ἴσα ποιεῖν) and yell like peasants chasing beasts in the fields. . . ." In classical usage the word *δημότης* meant "a common man," and this is how F. Miklosich understood the passage ("plebeio more"),<sup>17</sup> as well as E. Hansack ("wie ein gemeiner Mann").<sup>18</sup> Such an interpretation, however, does not take into account the meaning that this word developed in Byzantine Greek. It acquired a more particular meaning and began to be applied to

<sup>8</sup>Several words have been proposed to fill this role, both actually existing ones (σαμάραχος [Veselovskij, "Razyskanija," 182], μασαράς [Famincin, *Skomorohi*, 84–85], σαμαράεις [Safarik, *Slavjanskije drevnosti*, I, 2 (Moscow, 1848), 85]) and those made up *ad hoc* (σομοβουστῆς [Veselovskij, "Razyskanija," 179], σωμμάραχος [M. Fasmer, *Greko-slavjanskije etjudy*, III (St. Petersburg, 1909), 184]). None of these, however, can be accepted as a fully convincing source for the loan. It cannot be ruled out that the Slavic *skomrah* indicates the existence of a Greek analogue to the Italian *scaramuccia* (the etymology for which is also unclear; cf. V. Brim, "Termin skomoroh," *Jafetičeskij sbornik* 2 [1923], 96–97). But no such word is preserved in the available Byzantine texts.

<sup>9</sup>Cf. *Sinajskij paterik* (Moscow, 1967), 74–75, 100; PG 87, cols. 2880–81, 2901. It seems also natural that in the Slavic translation of Malalas, "igry skomraškaja i kukoľ'naja" was used to express ἀγῶνας ἀκροαμάτων καὶ θυμειλικῶν, σπηνικῶν: V. Istrin, "Hronika Ioanna Malaly v slavjanskom perevode," *Sbornik otdela russkogo jazyka i slovesnosti* AN 89, 7 (1912), 17.10–17. See John Malalas, *Chronographia*, Bonn ed. (1829), 225. Another Greek prototype of *skomrah* is (δ) ἐπὶ σπηνῆς (cf. N. Meščerskij, *Istorija iudejskoj vojny* . . . [Moscow-Leningrad, 1958], 329; Josephus, *Jewish War*, III [Cambridge, 1979], 46).

<sup>10</sup>V. Malinin, *Izslodovanie Zlatostruja po rukopisi XII v.* (Kiev, 1878), 208.

<sup>11</sup>Veselovskij, "Razyskanija," 204.

<sup>12</sup>P. Norton, "The Vita S. Chrysostomi by Georgius Alexandrinus," *CPh* 20 (1925), 69–72.

<sup>13</sup>E. Hansack, *Die Vita des Johannes Chrysostomos des Georgios von Alexandrien in kirchenslavischer Übersetzung*, I (Freiburg, 1975), 12–13.

<sup>14</sup>H.-G. Beck, *Kirche und theologische Literatur im byzantinischen Reich* (Munich, 1959), 460; J. Ch. Baur, *Johannes Chrysostomus und seine Zeit*, I (Munich, 1926), xxi.

<sup>15</sup>Hansack, *Vita*, 45–48. The Bulgarian translation was probably made from the Greek manuscript that is stemmatically closest to the Athos ms. Iber. 263 of the four Greek copies used for extant editions, although the ms. itself is late. Cf. S. Ivanov, "Ob istočnike slavjanskogo perevoda Psevdo-Georgija Alexandrijskogo," *Slavjane i ih sosedi. Sbornik tezisev* (Moscow, 1990), 41–43.

<sup>16</sup>F. Halkin, *Douze récits byzantins sur saint Jean Chrysostome* (Bruxelles, 1977), 80.

<sup>17</sup>F. Miklosich, *Lexicon palaeoslovenico-graeco-latinum* (Vienna, 1862–66), 847. Perhaps the translation is taken from Savile's edition of Chrysostom, which is inaccessible to me.

<sup>18</sup>Hansack, *Vita*, 155.

members of the circus factions, that is, the demes.<sup>19</sup> In the above-mentioned passage Anthemios' conduct has nothing to do with that of common people, except perhaps for his loud voice, but this feature is used as a basis for comparing him to hunting peasants. He is likened to δημόται because of the arrogant and groundless claims he makes to the authorities—this is precisely the way demes behaved.

Although in reality Hippodrome factions did not exist in Chrysostom's time,<sup>20</sup> the hagiographer applied to the fourth century the *reale* of a later period: Byzantine history from the late fifth to early seventh century literally swarms with the excesses of the demes, and the last mention of their political activity can be found in the 740s.<sup>21</sup> It is therefore clear what the hagiographer had in mind when he put that derogatory comparison into the eparch's mouth.

What is mysterious, though, is the way that this sentence was translated into Slavic: "*Ne lepo i posr'd savora skomrashska redno tvoriti*"<sup>22</sup>—"It is improper in a gathering [like this] to behave in a jesterlike(?) manner." Even if we accept the meaning "common people," suggested by some scholars for δημόται, it would be impossible to explain how this managed to evolve into "buffoons"; the word δημόται was usually translated as "*narod*" ("people")<sup>23</sup> in Slavic sources of the time. Since Southern Slavs were well acquainted with Byzantine popular spectacles<sup>24</sup> it cannot be assumed that the translator failed to understand the obvious meaning of the word δημόται. This context, however, gives us an idea first, of the semantic range of the word *skomrah* and, second, of how the demes of the early tenth century appeared to an outside observer.

Thus it can be supposed that the original significance of the term *skomrah* was not simply jester, but rather everything related to the Hippodrome spectacle: the circus rather than common mimes, horse races, and even factions.

The Hippodrome was one of the basic symbols of Byzantium in the eyes of the world: many "barbarian" rulers who in one way or other tried to compete with the basileus attempted to create their own substitute for the Hippodrome of Constantinople.<sup>25</sup> The Kievan princes were no exception: when they built St. Sophia Cathedral in their own capital they thought it necessary to decorate it with imperial symbols. This is why frescoes depicting Hippodrome races appeared on the staircase of the southwestern tower, which had been added to the cathedral in the late eleventh century.<sup>26</sup> But what is most important for us is that these same frescoes also showed the clown performances in detail.<sup>27</sup> They were painted by a Greek master and are the only pictures portraying Byzantine circus buffoons (any attempt to present them as scenes of Russian life is totally groundless). The reason why these pictures appeared in the cathedral is that in the eyes of the prince and his court, a Hippodrome was an indispensable adjunct of supreme power, and jesters an indispensable accessory at the Hippodrome. It is this entanglement of meanings that was originally rendered by the word *skomrahs*. The term, we assume, was applied in the beginning exclusively to the prince's clowns and only later acquired a broader sense.

It is also interesting how the famous demes appeared to the tenth-century Slavs. They were taken as a mere part of the Hippodrome spectacle. However, this development can also be traced in Byzantine sources. As early as the fifth century each faction had its own menagerie, dancers, musicians, and mimes.<sup>28</sup> The situation did not change even after 691 when the Council in Trullo banned mime shows: in all likelihood the mime backdrop to the races remained unchanged.<sup>29</sup> However, this aspect of the demes' activity was overshadowed by the political threat associated with them.

With the growth of the ceremonial and recreational function of the demes, their members be-

<sup>19</sup> Lampe, s.v.; Sophokles, s.v. This word also acquired specific meanings (cf. G. Schirò, "Un significato sconosciuto di δημότης," *RCCM* 7 [1965], 1015).

<sup>20</sup> A. Cameron, *Circus Factions* (Oxford, 1976), 225.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 304.

<sup>22</sup> Hansack, *Vita*, 154.

<sup>23</sup> V. Istrin, *Hronika Georgija Amartola*, I (Petrograd, 1920), 262-28. Unfortunately, other uses of the word δημοι in our *Vita* (Halkin, *Récits*, 177, 124) are omitted by the Slavic translator.

<sup>24</sup> I. Dujčev, "Theatron—Pozorište," *Zbornik Svetozara Radoviča* (Belgrade, 1969), 78-81. I would like to point out a curious example. In the translation of the *Vita* of Basil the Younger, describing a hippodrome scene, the Slavic litteratus

adds his own clarification for the reader: "A round is when four chariots compete in racing seven laps around the hippodrome" [S. Vilinskij, *Žitie sv. Vasilija Novogo*, II (Odessa, 1911), 470].

<sup>25</sup> G. Dagron, *Naissance d'une capitale* (Paris, 1974), 303.

<sup>26</sup> V. Lazarev, *Istorija vizantijskoj živopisi*, I (Moscow, 1986), 79.

<sup>27</sup> *Russkie drevnosti v pamjatnikah iskusstva*, IV (St. Petersburg, 1891), 148-59. X-ray analysis, recently undertaken by I. Tokaja, revealed the original form of the frescoes.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Procopius, *Anecdota*, 9.2-13; Malalas, *Chronographia*, 368; *Cod. Just.* XI, 41, 5 etc.

<sup>29</sup> F. Tinnefeld, "Zum profanen Mimos in Byzanz nach dem Verdikt des Trullanum 691," *Byzantina* 6 (1974), 329-30, 333,

came more and more involved in a variety of shows: on holidays, and when their charioteers were victorious, all the factionaries would dance.<sup>30</sup> In some cases buffoonlike behavior was even a prescribed ritual. Constantine Porphyrogenitus describes one of these ceremonies: "Blues and Greens return to their demes, while the demarchs stand above heaping insults on each other."<sup>31</sup> Not only did the demes gradually behave more like mimes, but the reverse was also true: the former acquired some political functions. For example, they played similar roles in carnival processions mocking certain persons (καταπόμπευσις), when the victim, or somebody dressed as one, was carried on a donkey and pelted with blows and jeers against a background of obscene songs. It was the demes, for example, who performed in this way during the uprising against the emperor Maurice,<sup>32</sup> but it is beyond doubt that the main participants in this kind of public shaming were mimes.<sup>33</sup>

335–36; R. Guiland, "Étude sur l'Hippodrome de Byzance," *BSI* 27 (1966), 292–94.

<sup>30</sup>Guiland, "Étude," 296, 299, 300.

<sup>31</sup>Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *De caerimoniis*, I, Bonn ed. (1829), 357.

<sup>32</sup>Theophylact Simocatta, *Historia* VIII, 9, 4–8; Theophanes, *Chronographia* (Leipzig, 1883), 282.16. Cf. Procopius, *De Bellis* I, 9, 11. Only one specimen of such a song is preserved: G. Morgan, "A Byzantine Satirical Song?," *BZ* 47 (1954), 295–96.

<sup>33</sup>See: Procopius, *De Bellis* III, 3, 9; Anna Comnenae *Alexias* XII, 6, 5; H. Delehay, *Synaxarium CP*, 186; Evagrius, *Historia* VI, 7; *Acta Maximi*, col. 165. Cf. V. Darkevič, *Narodnaja kul'tura srednevekovja* (Moscow, 1988), 192–93.

Even so serious a political issue as the *Acts of Kalo-podios* had a mime backdrop.<sup>34</sup>

There is an enigmatic passage in Kekaumenos, which seems to refer to this process of the "merging" of functions: "ἔσο πολιτικός, οὐ λέγω δὲ πολιτικὸς οἶον μῖμος καὶ παιγνιότης."<sup>35</sup> No adequate explanation for this sentence has been offered till now.<sup>36</sup> It follows that the word πολιτικός which proved to be synonymous with the notion of δημοτικός<sup>37</sup> could also be understood as a synonym of μῖμος. This rapprochement appears natural to us: Kekaumenos warns against this very fusion of meanings that is found by the anonymous Slavic translator of the *Vita* of John Chrysostom: πολιτικός, (mis)understood as μῖμος, is nearly the same as δημόται (mis)interpreted as *skomrahs*.

When a "higher" culture comes in contact with a "low" one, it is the former that normally provides us with information about the latter. Sometimes we also manage to learn what the "lower" culture thinks about the "higher" one. I suggest that there is also a third point of view: that of one culture reflected in another as in a mirror.

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<sup>34</sup>A. Solomos, 'Ο ἅγιος Βάκχος ἢ ἄγνωστα χρόνια τοῦ ἐλληνικοῦ θεάτρου 300 π.Χ.–1600 μ.Χ. (Athens, 1987), 138. Cf. PG 100, col. 556: καὶ δῆμοι καὶ μῖμοι.

<sup>35</sup>*Sovety i rasskazy Kekavmena* (Moscow, 1972), 132.

<sup>36</sup>Cf. *ibid.*, 156, 276, 350–51, 385, 570; H.-G. Beck, *Vademecum des byzantinischen Aristokraten* (Graz, 1956), 155.

<sup>37</sup>Lampe, s.v.; L. Bréhier, *Les institutions de l'Empire byzantin* (Paris, 1949), 201.